

MUCH ADO, SICILIAN STYLE

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In the New Penguin introduction to *Much Ado About Nothing*, Janette Dillon states “Greg Doran’s 2002 production . . . emphasized the dark side as well as the sunlight of stereotypical Sicily, drawing in the programme notes on Mafioso ideas of manliness to explain the play’s highly developed sense of male honour.”¹ Michael Dobson, on the other hand, proclaimed that it was “visually in the Italy of the 1930s [which] made for elegance and clarity but little more.” Dobson seemed to have objections to the period setting in general, going on to describe it as a “Merchant-Ivory exercise in poignant escapism, spared any uncomfortable contemporary references.”² Both of these comments, however, are superficial commentaries on the visual aspect of the production. Dillon’s comment is neutral, relying heavily on the programme notes, but Dobson clearly focuses on the visual aspects of the setting to the exclusion of all other elements. As theatre reception is ultimately subjective, it is not possible to categorically insist that Dobson’s perception is incorrect, but this does demonstrate a naivety in the analysis of period setting in Shakespearean production. Michael Kahn, the artistic director of the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C., in a conversation with Ralph Berry, usefully separated the types of period setting in Shakespeare into two distinct categories: “*décor*” and “concept,” as recounted by Berry: “By ‘*décor*’ [Kahn] means a period style that is chosen for its visual elegance and offers a purely cosmetic way of dressing up the text. ‘Concept’ means that in pointing to a particular set of national and historical circumstances via the costumes, the director marks close and striking affinities with the realities of the text.”³ Rather than being a *décor* period setting, as Dobson seems to assert in his comments about Merchant-Ivory and escapism, in this article I propose that Doran and his actors integrated the setting with the action in the text.

Gregory Doran set his production of *Much Ado About Nothing* in the Sicily of 1936. According to John Hopkins, who played Claudio, the production was presented to the cast as a “*fait accompli*” when rehearsals began.⁴ As the director’s concept was already in place, the actors worked within its confines in order to produce their rendering of Shakespeare’s play. Doran’s rationale for setting the play in Sicily can be found in a piece on the production in *Focus* magazine. During a holiday, Doran had “found that present day life on the island reflected many of the issues in Shakespeare’s play – issues regarding the place of women, the church and the law. And, of course, the

heat, symbolised in the raging tempers of the characters.”⁵ Hopkins elaborated that Doran had been looking for a setting that had “strong religious elements”⁶ contained within it. Therefore, two interlocking issues are relevant in both Elizabethan England and the Sicilian culture chosen by Doran: patriarchy and its obsessive guarding of a woman’s chastity. Both of these issues were paramount in the construction and playing of Doran’s Sicilian *Much Ado*.

Two statements confirm that Doran’s observations of Sicilian culture have parallels with the Elizabethan culture of Shakespeare’s play. Laura Gowing asserts that in early modern England, “[the] honour of the household is invested in a monogamous sexual bond, a joint marital honour which gives words like ‘cuckold’ and ‘whore’ implications for both partners.”⁷ Giving credence to Doran’s assertion that present day life in Sicily has parallels with Elizabethan mores, Maureen Giovanni states that in Sicily, there is an “overt identification between female chastity and family honour.”⁸ Thematically, Shakespeare explores these issues, particularly the notion that daughters are their father’s property in marriage, in many of his plays. The expectation of this is seen in *Much Ado*, as Hero will be, as Antonio says, “ruled by [her] father” (2.1.45⁹) in the choice of husband. The other conviction is that she should – and will – be, as Claudio enquires, “a modest young lady” (1.1.157) – “modest” meaning, of course, chaste. The societal code that women were expected to be chaste is of such paramount importance in both Elizabethan England and twentieth century Sicily, that a woman’s chastity is directly linked to a family’s honour in both ages. Blok, in fact, states that in Sicily honour is at stake when “property rights are wilfully infringed...[For instance,] when the chastity of a woman is violated.”¹⁰ To this end, the Sicilians have a code called *sfregio* that “literally means the disfigurement or mutilation of someone’s face by cutting his cheek with a knife so as to leave a long, visible scar as a lasting mark of dishonour.”¹¹ The Elizabethan parallel for *sfregio* becomes apparent when Hero is supposed dead in order to save her honour. It is also present in the deadly earnest in which Beatrice instructs Benedick to “Kill Claudio” (4.1.288). In both Elizabethan England and Sicilian culture, female chastity and honour are mixed in what can be a lethal combination.

That Doran and his cast paid particular attention to the place setting of Sicily is evident in the extensive research undertaken regarding the island’s culture during the rehearsal period. The production records contain a folder with a variety of topics separated into plastic wallets including “Sicilian People,” “the Order of Low Mass,” an excerpt “From ‘The Leopard,’” “Sicilian Character,” “Image of Women and Virgin Mary,” “Catholicism” and “Sicilian Courting.”¹² The archive also preserves a sign-out sheet for a variety of research materials, including books and videos. This shows that the acting company undertook their own personal exploration of Sicilian life, a fact corroborated by John Hopkins, who told me that he had read *The Leopard*, which he

described as being about “the laziness of Sicily”. Hopkins also mentioned that he had looked at the early *Godfather* films, which were also viewed by other members of his cast, according to the production records.¹³ The fruits of this research are perceptible in the programme notes as well as evident within the production itself, in the way that each dealt with the dominant Sicilian issues which Doran cites as relevant to Shakespeare’s play, particularly the place of women in that society. The research that Doran’s cast engaged in during rehearsals helped them to establish the underlying themes of patriarchy, honour, and the violence of Sicilian society, all of which combined to stunning effect in their staging of Act 4, Scene 1. As John F. Cox notes, “Actors have often attempted to soften Claudio’s rejection of Hero.”¹⁴ However, in the Sicilian milieu, as I will demonstrate, that is exactly what Hopkins, as Claudio, did not do. Had he alleviated Hero’s humiliation, it would have played against the patriarchal honour culture that the production had assimilated.

In accordance with Doran’s desire to show a society where religion is paramount, the church scene (Act 4, Scene 1) was performed under the watchful eye of a large statue of the Virgin Mary. The research preserved in the archive shows that the production’s personnel were aware of the prominence of the Madonna in Sicilian life. The statue was a powerful symbolic image because, as Giovanni records:

the virginity of a family’s unmarried women is a highly valued attribute which both female and male family members strive to preserve. . . . [I]t is also true that women are socialised to accept and even desire the role of *la Vergine*. . . . At [First Communion and Confirmation] ten and eleven year old pre-pubescent girls don the symbols of purity (white dress and veil) for the first time and dramatically affirm the idea of virginity which they are expected to maintain until they appear in church again dressed in white as brides.¹⁵

The theatricality of the Virgin image used by Doran, therefore, established a subtext that was charged with a patriarchal ideal – both in Elizabethan England and twentieth-century Sicily – of the importance of a woman’s chastity. To emphasise this point, three characters during the course of the scene contemplated the Virgin Mary: Claudio as he entered, Leonato after Claudio’s “Out on thee, seeming!” (4.1.55), and Beatrice on her exit at the end of the scene.¹⁶

The imagery which Doran and his designer provided for the church scene, combined with the actions of the men on the stage, gave Act 4, Scene 1 a patriarchal aspect rarely seen in performance. As a result, Claudio’s rejection of Hero at the altar, with this powerful symbol of chastity looking on, was brutal in its intensity. On Claudio’s “There, Leonato, take her back again” (29), the would-be groom pushed Hero, returning the “soiled” goods to their original owner with a violence that sent Hero reeling into her father’s arms, several paces downstage from Claudio. The ferocity of Claudio’s anger continued a few lines later as he pulled Hero out of Leonato’s grasp and

threw her upstage toward the Madonna statue. Claudio tore off her veil on “But she is none” (38), throwing the symbol of virginity contemptuously to the ground. When Hero asked him “And seemed I ever otherwise [chaste] to you?” (54), his rejoinder was to shout his reply: “Out on thee, seeming!” (55). When she responded to his rant with “Is my lord well, that he doth speak so wide?” (60), Claudio spat at her feet and walked away, his honour satisfied by her public humiliation in a bloodless version of *sfregio*.

When viewed in isolation, it is perhaps difficult to see how Doran’s setting combined with the text to give extra impetus to Claudio’s rejection of Hero. However, comparing other performances will help corroborate Cox’s assertion that Hero’s rejection is frequently softened, or perhaps more accurately, sanitized. For example, the archive video shows Ralph Fiennes’ Claudio (RSC 1988) giving a mellifluous delivery of lines – a trademark of Fiennes’ verse speaking – that contained more woe (or disappointment in his broken engagement, perhaps) than venom. On “There, Leonato, take her back again” (29), the video shows Claudio pushing Hero’s *arm* away from him and toward her father, but only her arm – the rest of her body remained stationary, the antithesis of the dynamic between Hopkins’ Claudio and Kirsten Parker’s Hero. Similarly, in 1982 Robert O’Mahoney’s Carolinean-dressed Claudio also returned his bride in a civilized fashion. In this version, Leonato stood upstage of Hero and Claudio and on “As freely, son, as god did give her me” (24), he clasped his two hands between theirs – in a gesture of handfasting – and gave away the bride. O’Mahoney removed his hand from the grasp on “There, Leonato, take her back again” (29) and slowly backed away from father and daughter.¹⁷ O’Mahoney’s action, instead of being that of an alpha male, showed the audience his inferior position within the gender politics of the scene, rather than operating as a decisive declaiming of Hero’s lack of chastity. From these comparisons, I conclude that the Sicilian setting allows a more sustained onslaught of Hero in the church scene, with Sicilian ideas of male honour clearly linked in Doran’s production to Hero’s chastity. This subtext encourages extra venom from both Claudio and, as will be demonstrated next, Leonato during the course of the scene.

In Shakespeare’s Messina, Leonato is very much the patriarch or, in today’s seemingly innocuous parlance, “the man of the house.” Again, the overlaying of Sicilian patriarchy onto Shakespeare’s text allowed Doran’s production to add a dimension to Leonato’s character that is often missed in performance: that of a patriarchal tyrant controlling his family’s honour. Michael Billington described Gary Waldhorn’s Leonato as an “intemperate Sicilian patriarch, [who] genuinely threatens to strike at his daughter’s life.”¹⁸ Waldhorn displayed Leonato’s authority with quiet simplicity, embodying the old actor’s adage that “less is more,” meaning that often the most powerful actions onstage are ones where there is a minimum of movement. After Claudio had exited, Leonato seemed in shock, as he uttered “Hath no man’s dagger here a point for me?” (107) in a

daze as his daughter collapsed. It was at this point that Beatrice spoke her first words in the scene. As Beatrice pleaded “Help, uncle!” (113), Leonato was seated downstage left. He made no move to revive his daughter as the women hovered around the supine Hero downstage right. Instead, Leonato responded with “Death is the fairest cover for her shame” (114), speaking neither too softly nor too loudly, but in a tone of voice whose normalcy was at odds with this momentous pronouncement. In accordance with Sicilian notions of male honour, there was no doubt from his delivery that this Leonato’s honour would only be satisfied if his daughter were indeed dead. It is significant that Leonato and the women were separated by approximately half the stage at this moment, symbolizing the segregation of the sexes that occurred throughout this production.¹⁹

As Hero recovered from her faint, Leonato began his answer to the Friar’s “Yea, wherefore should she not [look up]?” (117) quietly, saying the first seven lines of his speech softly. His body was turned away from the women on “Myself would, on the rearward of reproaches,” (124), almost as though he could not bear to look at his defiled daughter any longer. But on “Strike at thy life” (125), he shifted in his seat again to face the women and shouted the words at Hero with venom, demonstrating the repressed violence of Sicilian society combining with the wound his honour had just suffered. Although Waldhorn was seated, the quiet power – and sudden force – with which he delivered his lines reinforced his character’s authority within this Sicilian society, as well as his domination over the women on the opposite side of the stage. Waldhorn used vocal volume sparingly, emphasising key lines rather than shouting through the entire scene. It was a powerful choice, as shouting throughout a scene often gives the impression of weakness. (This theatrical truism is perhaps nowhere better expressed than in Anton Chekov’s play *The Seagull*. Here, Konstantin gives an astute description of his former lover Nina’s dreadful acting, which is the antithesis of Waldhorn’s quiet power: “She always took leading roles, but she played them crudely, tastelessly, shouting her head off and waving her arms around”²⁰).

Waldhorn continued to moderate his speech, hitting crucial lines to make his brutal, patriarchal point and on “Confirmed, confirmed” (148), Leonato grew hoarse with anger. As this five-line speech reached a climax, Waldhorn’s stillness erupted into brutality as he lunged for Hero on “Hence from us let her die” (152). The promptbook records the stage direction for this moment: “[Leonato crosses] to [the] women, pushes [Beatrice] & [Ursula] away from [Hero]. [Benedick] intercedes, pulls [Leonato] off and moves him away S[tage] L[eft] back to chair.” The Friar then intervened but, for the bulk of the cleric’s speech, Leonato petulantly turned his back on the Friar.²¹ Leonato returned to face him in rebuke on “Friar, it cannot be./Thou seest that all the grace that she hath left/Is that she will not add to her damnation/A sin of perjury” (168-71). Leonato then shouted, exasperated, the next four words “She not denies it” (172) at the

Friar, playing the rest of the speech in a lower register which gives “She not denies it” more emphasis. Like Hopkins’ Claudio, Waldhorn’s Leonato was fully embedded in the Sicilian society which the cast had created. Both Hopkins and Waldhorn exhibited the Sicilian attitudes toward women and their own honour through a woman’s chastity, culminating with the abortive wedding scene.

As with Claudio’s rejection of Hero at the altar, it is necessary to compare other productions at the same moment in order to see the unique patriarchal power contained within Doran’s Sicilian setting. Antony Brown, who played Leonato in the 1988 RSC production, was almost constantly pacing – or perhaps fidgeting is more accurate, as he would pace one or two steps forward then hesitate, returning in the direction from which he had just come. A specific example visible in the recorded production was Brown traversing the upstage circular playing space. He did not look at Hero, who had fainted centre stage and who remained there throughout the bulk of the rest of the scene, and said “Do not live, Hero” (121) while shaking his head, as if in regret contrasting with the order that Waldhorn’s Leonato had issued to his daughter. Even when Brown moved to attack Hero on “Strike at thy life” (125), his movements were neither quick nor sudden enough to signify a real threat to his daughter. The promptbook captures the intention of the movement, recording that “Leon[ato] lunges at Hero. Caught by Ben[edick] and F[riar] F[ran]cis. Ant[onio] moves in from S[tage] R[ight]. Urs[ula] screams.” However, Brown resisted Benedick and the Friar so little on the archive video that Benedick appeared to be using excessive force to restrain the older man; Brown’s Leonato was in no way controlling the situation. The weakened body language was evident in other performances of Leonato as well during this scene, contrasting with Waldhorn’s imperious Sicilian male.

Meanwhile, Paul Webster’s Elizabethan-garbed Leonato (RSC 1990) had collapsed onto the stage floor as Claudio and his cohorts exited. From this position he began his line “O Fate, take not away thy heavy hand” (115), crawling over to the group that had surrounded Hero centre stage. Webster’s tone was relatively strong and he did vocally take control of the stage. Unfortunately, he delivered his lines whilst on the floor and, as he was level with the other players rather than towering over them, the positioning was incredibly weak. The strong vocal tone did not last as he began to lengthen his vowels, sounding as though he was an unhinged preacher as he spoke “Cry shaaaame upon her” (121), flailing his arms (in an unwitting parody of Chekov’s Nina). He also pointed at Hero, rather than lunging for her and addressing her at first from all fours. This does not represent the body language of a father in a violent rage and gives the impression of a man insecure in his reaction to his daughter’s predicament. On “Myself would on the rearward of reproaches” (126), he briefly raised himself up onto his knees and gestured toward the heavens as though making an oath – addressing

“Strike at thy life” (127) upward, not at Hero, as though asking a higher power to intervene – then returned to his canine position to address Hero once again. Both Brown and Webster lacked the ferocity of a father who raged against his daughter for losing her value in the marriage market and, thus, had brought shame upon his house.

Although academic critics rarely mention the influence of the period setting, as illustrated by the quotations with which I began this article, the setting was given more credence by the newspaper critics. For comparative purposes, one production’s reviews will suffice. The 1990 version will be used because, in terms of its ethos, it would have expressed characteristics closest to the Sicilian setting. The reviews for Bill Alexander’s production contain ambiguous references to the events in the church: John Gross writes that the director “recognises the darker elements in the play”²²; the *Daily Telegraph* states that the “play’s balance between comedy...and tragedy is nicely maintained”²³ without going into further detail. This was the overall result in a study of the reviews for other productions as well, and significantly, the church scene did not make it into print, except with the vaguest of mentions, revolving around the plot aspects. In contrast, reviewers responded to Doran’s abortive wedding scene in detail, and the difference highlights the fact that the same reviewers – the majority of whom had seen more than one production of *Much Ado* throughout their careers – had seen a new facet of the play, honed by its period Sicilian setting. Many of them felt that the church scene made more sense of the Elizabethan text than any other production. Paul Taylor, for instance, wrote at length about the church scene:

This milieu, with its macho *omerta* values, gives a powerfully reinvigorated edge to the Claudio-Hero subplot and its unlovely exposure of brutal male jealousy and double standards. A statue of the Virgin Mary is borne in at the head of the wedding procession, suggesting that this impossible combination of the maternal and the intacta is the Sicilian male ideal. The production imparts a frightening violence to the scene, with Gary Waldhorn’s Leonato having to be restrained from attacking his poor wronged daughter in a selfish paroxysm of patriarchal face-saving.²⁴

Nicholas de Jongh concurred, arguing that “The Italian emphasis brilliantly makes sense of the potential tragedy of Hero’s rejection at the altar by . . . Claudio. It explains the fierce attack upon her character and the closing of male ranks.”²⁵ In a similar vein, Charles Spencer opined “I have never seen a more dramatically gripping, or emotionally distressing, staging of the great scene in which Claudio brutally rejects and denounces Hero at their wedding, only for her father to turn viciously on her too.”²⁶ Spencer, in his review for the London transfer a few months later, refined his opinion, stating that “the wedding ceremony is played with real psychological perception and packs a devastating and painful dramatic punch.”²⁷ Michael Billington concurred, reporting that he had “rarely seen the church scene . . . better done.”²⁸

Gregory Doran's Sicilian production was clearly integrated to highlight the patriarchy embedded in the text. He and his cast did this by using a recognisably religious culture to symbolise Elizabethan mores. By showing the Italian culture, which prizes a woman's virtue and male honour, Doran made the Elizabethan values inherent in Shakespeare's play recognisable to a twenty-first century audience. There were detractors of this choice, however, and the setting did not fit all the facets of the plot. To say, as Dobson did, that the setting was essentially Merchant-Ivory escapism, is to miss the point of this particular theatrical performance. It also misjudges, as I have shown, how much work went into assimilating Sicilian culture to the point where the wedding scene could become a very powerfully staged theatrical moment, combining text and setting. Not all period Shakespeare settings are as detailed in their construction as Doran's since many graft an era superficially onto the text in the "décor." Further study of those that integrate period setting with the text will, however, illuminate how this creates an increased dramatic pleasure for spectators, enabling them to better enjoy viewing contemporary productions. This assessment of one scene will further a scholarly understanding of what has become an integral, yet overlooked, part of Shakespearean production.

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Much Ado About Nothing. Royal Shakespeare Company. 1988. Royal Shakespeare Theatre. Dir. Di Trevis. Perf. Maggie Steed, Clive Merrison. Archival videotape and promptbook. RSC Collection, Shakespeare Centre, Stratford-upon-Avon.

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Notes

¹ Janette Dillon, "The Play in Performance" in *Much Ado About Nothing* (London: Penguin Books, 2005) lxxv.

² Michael Dobson, "Shakespeare Performances in England, 2002," *Shakespeare Survey 56* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 267.

³ Ralph Berry, *On Directing Shakespeare: Interviews with contemporary directors* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989) 16.

⁴ John Hopkins, in conversation, 18 July 2006.

⁵ Uncredited, *Focus*, May 2002, 22.

⁶ Hopkins.

⁷ Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, 1998) 105-106.

⁸ Maureen J. Giovanni, "Woman: A Dominant Symbol Within the Cultural System of a Sicilian Town" in *Man* (New series, Vol. 16, No. 3, September 1981) 408.

⁹ Line numbers are from the Arden 3 edition, edited by Claire McEachern.

¹⁰ Anton Blok, "Rams and Billy-Goats: A Key to the Mediterranean Code of Honour," *Man* New Series, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Sept. 1981): 433.

¹¹ Blok, 433.

¹² Production records, RSC archive, Shakespeare Centre Library, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon.

¹³ Hopkins and RSC archive, Shakespeare Centre Library, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon.

¹⁴ John F. Cox, ed., *Shakespeare in Production: Much Ado About Nothing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 175.

¹⁵ Giovanni, 411-2.

¹⁶ Performance evidence throughout is taken from promptbooks and archive videos, located at the RSC archive, Shakespeare Centre Library, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon.

¹⁷ Archive video.

¹⁸ Michael Billington, "RSC improvement follows a false start," *Guardian*, 10 May 2002: 16.

¹⁹ There were many stage pictures of gender separation, beginning with a pre-show sequence that set up the place of women in the society in a textless vignette which lasted for six minutes before the first lines of the play were spoken.

²⁰ Anton Chekov, *The Seagull*, in a version by Christopher Hampton (London: Faber and Faber Plays, 2006) 68.

²¹ The blocking here had a two-fold purpose, the first to allow the petulance to be visible in the body language, and the second to give the audience full visibility of Leonato's reaction to the Friar's words.

²² John Gross, "Playing Shakespeare straight, for once," *Sunday Telegraph*, 15.4.90.

²³ Charles Osborne, "Much surprise at Stratford," *Daily Telegraph*, 12.4.90.

²⁴ Paul Taylor, "Much Ado About Nothing," *The Independent*, 15 May 2002: Features, 18.

²⁵ Nicholas de Jongh, "Mature Love Wins the Day," *Evening Standard*, 10 May 2002: 34.

²⁶ Charles Spencer, "Laughter amid the shadows," *Daily Telegraph*, 11 May 2002: 19.

²⁷ Charles Spencer, "RSC finds the golden touch," *Daily Telegraph*, 3 August 2002: 19.

²⁸ Billington, 10 May 2002.